

The Government is preventing overseas Australians from coming home

By Rachel Jackson

Returning home is a stressful and expensive process for overseas Australians. Rachel Jackson reports.

19-year-old Elizabeth Nuspan had no idea that the world was on the cusp of a pandemic when she flew from Melbourne to Spain in January 2020 to pursue her cycling career. After enduring a concussion and numerous lockdowns, she was thrilled to sign her first professional contract for an Italian women's cycling team in April 2021.

“We went all around Italy racing, coronavirus basically wasn’t a thing anymore,” Elizabeth said.

Elizabeth’s hard work came crashing to a halt when she was hit by a car during training in June 2021. Elizabeth was terrified after the accident as she lay on the road in Loreto, Ancona. She couldn’t feel her legs or feet.

“I thought I was paralysed,” Elizabeth said.

Elizabeth was taken to a nearby hospital by ambulance. The paramedics refused to give her any pain medication and she was left alone in a hospital corridor for six hours. She had multiple fractures to her pelvis and her pubic bone was broken.

Elizabeth had private health insurance and was transferred to Villa Dei Pini, a private hospital in Civitanova. She was not allowed visitors due to COVID-19 restrictions, but she was told that she was allowed a carer to be with her during her stay.

Upon hearing this news, Elizabeth's mother, Silvana Nuspan, immediately applied for a travel exemption from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). Ms Nuspan arrived nine days after the accident on July 2.

At the hospital, the doctors refused to show Elizabeth or her mother any X-Rays, or tell them what was broken or fractured.

"The doctor was so condescending," Elizabeth said. "I just wanted to get out."

The doctors also refused to provide Elizabeth and Ms Nuspan with an indication of how long Elizabeth's recovery would take.

"Every day that doctors refused to tell us was another day not being able to book a flight," said Ms Nuspan.

Ms Nuspan knew it was going to be a difficult process to travel back to Australia. She had already begun to search for commercial flights, and the price range was between \$7,000 and \$42,000 per person for a return trip.

After 42 days in hospital, Elizabeth discharged herself because she received flight clearance to return home. She still needed to attend the hospital three hours each day as an outpatient.

It was peak holiday season in Civitanova, and the only accommodation Ms Nuspan and Elizabeth could find was a one-bedroom apartment that cost \$7,000 for a three-week stay.

"All the costs were accumulating. It was just crazy," Elizabeth said.

At this time, Scott Morrison cut the overseas arrivals quota in half, and Olympic athletes were returning home from Tokyo. Ms Nuspan and Elizabeth could not find a flight home for six months.

“We searched Helsinki, Paris, Lithuania, Istanbul, Romania,” said Elizabeth. “Every single European city we tried.”

Ms Nuspan called the Australian Embassy in Italy, who said they could apply for tickets on a repatriation flight back to Australia. Once they had applied, they waited for a confirmation email to tell them if their case had been deemed worthy of two seats home.

“While we were waiting on a confirmation email, the Australian Embassy told us to call Lifeline and buy a gelati if we were feeling sad,” Elizabeth said.

The Green Pass system had come into effect in Italy while Elizabeth and Ms Nuspan were waiting for a repatriation flight. Elizabeth was not vaccinated yet, and Ms Nuspan had only her first dose of Pfizer.

After they waited for hours in line in the heat, the vaccination hub in Civitanova informed Ms Nuspan and Elizabeth that they could not receive a vaccine because they were not part of the public Italian healthcare system.

“It was 38 degrees, I was on crutches and there was no shade,” Elizabeth said.

Green passes were required to access all essential services such as supermarkets. Ms Nuspan told the Australian Embassy they had been refused food service, which strengthened their case for getting a seat on a repatriation flight home.

“We were extremely vulnerable,” Ms Nuspan said. “We were pretty desperate at this stage.”

Ten days after they left the hospital, Ms Nuspan received an email at 3AM informing her they had been allocated to a repatriation flight leaving from Frankfurt, Germany. They had seven hours to pack up their lives, book a flight to Frankfurt and complete pages of documentation.

“My pubic bone was still in two pieces and I should not have been walking,” Elizabeth said. “But I had no choice, we needed to pack and go.”

Australian former travel editor, Alice Ghent, also returned to Australia via a repatriation flight from Frankfurt this year. Ms Ghent had been working in Europe since 2007 and needed to return home due to serious illness.

Ms Ghent took the repatriation flight after her ticket home on Swiss Air was cancelled in September. She knew about the repatriation flights from reading Australian newspapers, and the Australian Embassy in Switzerland helped her to book a spot on a repatriation flight.

“Because I had been ill, they assisted me to get through all the procedures in Frankfurt and were very kind,” Ms Ghent said.

Ms Ghent was disappointed how the Australian Government treated overseas travellers trying to come home. She said people needed more time to prepare for the journey back.



Ms Ghent said the value of an Australian passport has gone down in her eyes. (Photo: Rachel Jackson)

“DFAT needs to inform people about flights months ahead of departure so that they have time to give up their leases and pack up their lives,” Ms Ghent said.

Ms Ghent said the Department of Foreign Affairs should have increased the number of Australians able to return, not decreased the number. She also believes fully vaccinated people should have been able to quarantine at home.

“Europeans were shocked that Australia was preventing its own citizens from returning home. They could not imagine that happening in their own countries,” said Ms Ghent. “The value of an Australian passport has gone down in my eyes. It’s like your family abandoning you at an hour of great need.”

Minister for Foreign Affairs, Marise Payne, was unavailable to comment on the issue.